

REMARKS BY MIKE GORMAN

TESTIMONIAL DINNER

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"Not enough doctors, not enough nurses, not enough toilet paper, not enough covers for cold nights. When the laundry did not get around to the wards in time, there were not enough sheets and not enough pillow cases. There wasn't enough of anything but patients."

As I stand here tonight, I cannot feel or believe that I wrote these words more than a quarter of a century ago to describe conditions in the largest mental hospital in Oklahoma. In that first story, having told the readers of our newspaper of a snake pit incarcerating 3,300 sufferers from mental illness in a human warehouse of locked cells, nakedness, and indescribable despair, I felt that my immediate task had been completed.

Returning to my task of reporting the bizarre annual antics of the Oklahoma legislature, I could not drive from my mind the anguished cries of the patients at Central State. Who were they? Why were they there? Why did no one -- not even members of their own family -- come to visit them? Why was all of this inhumanity so hidden from the public?

These nagging questions led me to return to Central State and then to visit the other mental hospitals in Oklahoma. This time, I checked for details on the past histories and travails of the inmates. I felt somewhat like Lazarus raising the dead -- giving flesh, bones and meaning to people who had been buried alive.

Not a trained archeologist, I probed through layer upon layer to reconstruct the identities of these inhabitants of the Lost City of the Mad. I turned up doctors, lawyers, school teachers and, interestingly, seven former members of the Oklahoma legislature. I wasn't too surprised, because I knew that many more just as crazy were outside running the legislature in 1946.

But having found the lost city -- and many other lost cities of the mad as I journeyed through a sub-continent of despair from state to state -- how could we bring a half million people out of the shadows? How expose what in my later writings I often referred to as the twin conspiracies of silence and distance which had relegated millions of our people to physical and psychological bondage since Colonial times.

I then thought of an obituary I had written in 1945 on a prominent Oklahoma doctor. I checked the hospital; they gave me the usual "after a long illness" bit. I wasn't satisfied, so I checked several doctor friends of his and mine. They admitted, after repeated questioning, that he had died of cancer. I wrote the obit, including the precise cause of death. The next day the obituary appeared without the word "cancer" in it. Quite annoyed, I went to the city editor and protested. He replied that he was following a national policy of the media that we would not attribute any death to cancer. It had a stigmatizing connotation and it terrified family, friends and the general public. I asked him how we could combat this obviously frightening disease if the people remained in widespread ignorance of its decimating impact. He shrugged his shoulders.

After months of thrashing about, I now had a perceived focus. I would try, with the limited talents at my disposal, to break the even heavier stigma enveloping mental illness by pounding the hard facts home not only to our readers, but to every elected official in the land whose past indifference was contributory to the present outrage.

I heeded well the admonition of slavery's greatest foe, William Lloyd Garrison:

"I will be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject, I do not wish to think, or speak, or write, with moderation... Urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present. I am in earnest. I will not equivocate; I will not excuse; I will not retreat a single inch; and I will be heard. "

In the brief timespan allotted to me by the impressarios of this non-partisan benefit, I cannot enumerate all of the exciting events leading to a revolutionary change of attitude toward the mentally ill in America. However, I cannot pass by the enormous contributions of the Governors of the several states starting in the late 1940's. At their annual conferences, largely devoted in past years to farm-to-market roads, the fate of the Air National Guard and other world shaking issues, they now gave us a prominent place at the head table. The several historic studies mandated by the National Governors' Conference and carried out so ably by the Council of State Governments exposed the bankruptcy and inhumanity of custodial institutions and led to the creation by Congress in 1955 of the Joint Commission on Mental Illness and Health. The report of that Commission provided the foundation for President John F. Kennedy's magnificent mental health message in 1963, in which he called for the eventual abolition of the custodial state hospital system and its replacement by a network of mental health centers in the heart of the community.

We are in the beginning stages of this new revolution, but we can already point to aⁿ almost 50 percent drop in patients confined in state mental hospitals. In an era when there is much talk of the decline of responsive government, it is appropriate to note that here federal and state governments listened to the voice of the people and forged one of America's finest hours in the whole area of human services.

Twenty years ago, I wrote what I thought was a pretty good magazine piece on the anatomy of the crusader. From the comfortable vantage point of additional experience and retrospect, I would now alter that profile considerably.

First of all, you have to be slightly mad because the landscape you traverse is both uncertain and impossibly steep; as you climb the first mountain and take a deep breath of satisfaction, you look ahead and there is a much higher one right in front of you.

You must cultivate patience -- a very difficult virtue for a hot-blooded Irishman. It is a discipline which can only be acquired. I remember vividly a long conversation I had with Lord Lister Hill in 1951. I was then working for Mr. Truman as Director of a Presidential Commission on the Health Needs of the Nation and moonlighting on a bill for aid to medical education which Senator Hill had first introduced in 1949. We were decisively defeated on the floor of the Senate that year, and I reminded the great Senator from Alabama that two years of very hard work had gone down the drain. He replied that we had just fired the opening salvo. We would prevail eventually only if we pursued the issue with undiminished determination. In 1963, 14 years after the advent of the legislation, the Congress passed the first significant bill providing federal aid for the training of health professionals.

I am now deeply and happily involved in the battle for national health insurance. We lost the first round 20 years ago, but we are back now with enormously increased public support, and there is no doubt that this time we will prevail.

In this crusading game, I suppose you have to have an affinity for seemingly lost causes: Mental illness, population control, health insurance, the conquest of cancer, the

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eradication of the common cold, the seven-year itch (which the NIH can now cure in eight years), and so on through the litany of man's afflictions in his voyage upon this planet.

Above all, you have to possess an irrepressible desire to participate actively in this arduous experiment which our Founding Fathers launched on these shores two centuries ago.

I share the faith of Professor Thomas Woodrow Wilson who, two decades before assuming the Presidency of these United States, observed that:

"Democratic institutions are never done -- they are, like the living tissue, always a-making. It is a strenuous thing, this of living the life of a free people: and we cannot escape the burden of our inheritance."

In this little city on George Washington's Potomac, we live this strenuous life and, oddly enough, most of us enjoy it.

I am profoundly grateful to all of you here tonight -- and many more of our good people throughout the land for allowing me to march with you in a variety of exciting crusades. I treasure the experiences, I cherish the memories, but most of all, I value the warm personal contacts and friendships -- even those with the members of the greatest deliberative body between Annapolis to the north and Richmond to the south.

You renew and invigorate my faith. Frankly, it doesn't need much invigorating for I am a kindred spirit with the engineer Charles Kettering who once observed that:

"No disease is incurable; it only seems so because of the ignorance of man."

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Since a testimonial is somewhat of a premature obituary -- and I trust this one is very premature -- I indulged in a bit of fantasy about what I would like on my tombstone. It would go something along these lines:

Here lies (thrashing about and trying to break loose)

Citizen Mike Gorman

Who, though possessed of quite ordinary talents,
Rose up and did battle for those of his fellow citizens who
could not speak for themselves.

In so doing, he helped in a small way to deepen the
compassionate wellsprings of this democracy.